

EDITORIAL: A DOUBLE-MINDED GOD UNSTABLE IN ALL HIS WAYS (2)

Rev. Martyn McGeown

Muddleheaded Mercy

John Piper is muddled on God's mercy. Many Christians share his muddled thinking. If you ask the average Christian to define mercy, they will say something like, "Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve. Mercy is God delaying punishment. Mercy is God giving undeserved gifts to people." But none of those things are God's mercy. First, mercy is an attribute of God, and as such God is merciful to Himself! In fact, God is rich—infinitely rich—in mercy and the overflowing fountain of all good (Eph. 2:4). God's mercy within Himself is His delighting in Himself as the highest and only good. Because God is merciful He can never be sad, and everything He does serves His unchangeable blessedness. Second, God's mercy flows from the fullness of His being toward the elect. It manifests itself as compassion, pity or tenderheartedness. God's mercy is shown toward the miserable and wretched who have become miserable in sin. The Old Testament word for mercy is *hesed* which means steadfast covenant love. Third, God's mercy is not a powerless pity but the almighty power of God to deliver His people from misery and to bring them to experience the highest blessedness, which is to taste and know that God is good and the overflowing fountain of all good.

If *that* is mercy, it cannot be what Piper says it is: genuine compassion which does not save because God prioritizes another desire or commitment over it. God never prioritizes anything higher than showing mercy to His people in Jesus Christ. This is because showing mercy, in which God is sovereignly free (Rom. 9:15), serves to glorify God. Mercy, however, is not common or ineffectual—two flaws in the mercy of Piper's god. The Bible never teaches that God is merciful to the wicked, or even that He desires to be merciful to them but "restrains Himself" because of more pressing concerns. God delays the punishment of the wicked and God gives the wicked good things which they do not deserve, but *that* is not mercy!

Psalm 136 repeats the refrain that God's mercy is eternal and particular. In every verse in this Psalm of twenty-six verses the Psalmist sings, "for his mercy endureth forever." Very instructive is the contrast between the objects of God's mercy (elect Israel) and the objects of God's wrath. Why did God kill Egypt's firstborn (v. 10), destroy Pharaoh and his host (v. 15) and smite great kings (vv. 17-20)? Because His mercy endureth forever—toward the elect. In Psalm 143:12 the elect believer prays, "And of thy mercy cut off mine enemies."

And notice Scripture does not say that one of God's mercies endureth forever but another of God's mercies endures only for a short time and ends in the lake of fire! God only has one mercy, and it endures forever!

Piper's Pillars of Universal Love

This brings us to the trio of Ezekiel passages which Piper calls "pillars of universal love."

It is bizarre that Ezekiel should have been misused for so long because it was the last thing from Ezekiel's mind—and from the Spirit's mind who inspired Ezekiel—to teach that God loves, has mercy on and desires to save all men. Such a concept was utterly foreign to the Old Testament. We sometimes read the Bible through the lens of modern sentimentalism. Today, it is controversial to teach that God does not love everyone. In biblical times, it was controversial to teach that God's love extends beyond Israel. That is why the "world" and "all men" passages in the New Testament were revolutionary in their day. Modern man has taken them too far. They do not mean every man head for head, but the Jews were reluctant to take them far enough; they *do* mean all nations, tribes and tongues. The Jew-Gentile distinction has indeed been broken down.

The Ezekiel trio of 18:23, 32 and 33:11 speak of God's good pleasure: "Have I any pleasure ...?", "I have no pleasure ...", "As I live ... I have no pleasure." Piper does not define God's good pleasure, but since the article we are examining is an appendix to his book, *The Pleasures of God*, we assume he did so elsewhere. God's good pleasure is at least three things. First, it is what God is pleased to do, that which seemed good to Him to decree and execute for His own glory (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Eph. 1:5). Second, God's good pleasure is that in which He delights or that which is pleasing in His sight. Third, it is that of which He

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approves in His creatures and therefore that which He commands (such as obedience and repentance). In Ezekiel, God declares emphatically with an oath that He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (18:23; 33:11) or in the death of him that dieth (18:32). But what Piper (and the Arminians) reads into the text is this: God earnestly desires that all wicked men, whoever and wherever they are, in every age and nation, not perish but turn and live. That is *not* what Ezekiel is teaching!

First, the context forbids it. The solemn oath of Jehovah in 33:11 occurs after chapters 25-32 in which God has prophesied death, destruction, doom and damnation upon Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon and Egypt. Are we seriously expected to believe that God did not desire the death of any of the wicked in any of those reprobate nations? How did God—who affirms this with a solemn oath—show this desire to save those wicked? Did God even send a prophet to announce the glad tidings to these nations that He did not have any pleasure in their death? Second, Ezekiel's careful qualifications forbid Piper's view. *Which* wicked does God have in mind? The house of Israel (18:32; 33:11)! Moreover, within the house of Israel, addressed as one organic whole, God does not even have all the wicked in mind. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked who *turn*. "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: *and not that he should return from his ways, and live?*" "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; *but that the wicked turn from his way and live.*" God says nothing here about any pleasure or displeasure He might have in the death of the wicked who does not turn. In fact—and Piper even quotes this text—there are some wicked in whose death God *does* delight, whose death *does* please God. I Samuel 2:25, speaking of the reprobate sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, teaches that "they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them." Literally, I Samuel 2:25 says, "because the LORD delighted, took pleasure in and willed to cause them to die." God *did* take pleasure in the death of these two non-turning, wicked, reprobate men. Hophni and Phinehas, although Israelites and sons of the high priest, were never the object of God's favour or love. God never had compassion on them. God never desired to save them, not even with a desire which He supposedly "restrained" under a conflicting desire to destroy them. They are not part of the wicked whose death gives God no pleasure.

This truth that God has no pleasure in the death of the repenting wicked is the pastoral appeal of Ezekiel's prophecy. Especially this is the case in chapter 33. God's people were in exile. They had seen their hopes dashed when news returned to them from Jerusalem. God's holy city and temple had been destroyed. In verse 10, the people lament, "If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?" Despair was in the camp of the exiles. God has finished with His people; there is no mercy, even if we turn, because the covenant is broken and Christ will never come. It was to *that* people that Ezekiel brings comfort—not to the heathen, not to everybody, not to the hardened and impenitent, but to God's despairing people. There is salvation and life for the wicked who *turns*—no matter how wicked he may be. The people of God in Ezekiel's audience needed that encouragement and we do too. Their companions were telling them that there was no point in turning, and the devil wanted them to despair so that they would never repent. God answers the fear of His own people who were sorry for their sins but were afraid to repent. God swears that there *is* life for the one who turns. Essentially what God says is this, "As I live, if I have no life for the wicked who turns, then I am not God. If the wicked turns to me from sin and finds no life in me, I am not the living God." Behind that solemn promise stands the cross.

It would have been nonsense and no comfort if Ezekiel had said to his contemporaries, "Do not worry. Jehovah loves everybody. He really desires to save everybody." The Israelites would have looked at him with incredulous astonishment (our reaction ought to be this too, if we know the Scriptures). "If God wants to save everybody," **Ezekiel's audience** might have asked, "Why did He not choose everybody? Why did He not make atonement for the sins of everybody? And why does He not give life to everybody?" Ezekiel could not have answered as Piper does, "Well, God *does* want to save everybody, but in his complex mind, God wants something more, which is to show his justice by destroying the wicked. But you must understand that this in no way negates God's genuine compassion towards the wicked whom He will punish forever in hell for their sins."

Ezekiel's God is no hypocrite who offers something He does not have. That is the god of the modern, confused, conflicted Calvinist like Piper: a god who is muddleheaded and double-minded, and thus unstable in all his ways.